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Iran: The Seizure of the Embassy in Retrospect

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A Research Paper

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Iran: The Seizure of the Embassy in Retrospect

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A Research Paper

*Information available as of 12 August 1981
has been used in the preparation of this report.*

This paper was prepared by [] of the
Office of Near East-South Asia Analysis. Comments
and queries are welcome and may be addressed to
the Chief, Persian Gulf Division, NESA []

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It was coordinated with the Offices of Soviet Analysis
and Global Issues, the National Intelligence
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Directorate of Operations. []

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**Iran: The Seizure of the
Embassy in Retrospect**

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Overview

The seizure of the US Embassy in Tehran and the prolonged crisis that followed demonstrate that in a highly volatile political environment there is little effective defense against an organized, determined group seeking to disrupt US policy and interests. The political instability in Iran that followed the fall of the monarchy in February 1979 was a major factor in both the takeover of the Embassy in November and in the inability and unwillingness of Iran's revolutionary leadership to bring the crisis to an end.

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The Islamic militants who seized the Embassy adopted the return of the Shah to Iran as one of their demands, but their primary goal was to force the pace of the revolution. Their occupation of the Embassy was designed to create a crisis in US-Iranian relations and thereby discredit the pragmatic policies of the Bazargan government. The Shah's presence in the United States served as a pretext for the occupation and a rallying point to stir up revolutionary fervor, but as the crisis developed, the Shah's fate became of only symbolic importance.

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The evidence suggests that Ayatollah Khomeini did not order the seizure of the Embassy and that he had no prior knowledge of plans for the takeover. Khomeini's anger over the Shah's travel to the United States and fear that his presence there posed a threat to the revolution developed slowly. His initial comments on the issue were comparatively mild. Analysis of his statements indicates that the influence of his more moderate advisers waned over time, however, while more radical members of his entourage gained the ascendancy, reinforcing the radical themes in his thinking.

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The militants—the “Muslim Student Followers of the Line of the Imam”—were not an established political or guerrilla group. During the 14 months of the crisis, however, a small leadership group and a core of 40 to 50 followers maintained strict discipline among themselves and over the larger group of politically unsophisticated provincials they recruited for the occupation. Throughout the hostage crisis the militants experienced both cooperation and conflict in their relations with the government. A number of administrative offices of the government, as well as “revolutionary” institutions such as the Revolutionary Guards and local revolutionary committees, provided logistical support.

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The seizure of the Embassy was conceived, planned, and directed by Iranian militants with the support or acquiescence of Iranian political and clerical leaders. Exhaustive review of the evidence reveals no indication that any foreign government or political organization was directly involved in planning or carrying out the takeover, or that a foreign government or political organization significantly influenced policy decisions by the militants during the prolonged crisis. The Iranian Government's assistance to the militants and the facilities available to them in the Embassy compound—including supplies of cash, food, and communications gear—precluded the need for foreign support once the seizure had been accomplished.

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US efforts to resolve the crisis were hindered by its political utility to Khomeini and to factions of the revolutionary leadership. In the short term, US policies were ineffective. US sanctions and diplomatic efforts imposed costs, however, that the Iranians continually had to weigh against the benefits of prolonging the crisis and the political risks of ending it. As the political utility of the crisis waned, economic sanctions, international isolation, and diplomatic pressure from intermediaries provided the incentive and the means for the Iranians to bring the crisis to an end.

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The Embassy Seizure as a Case Study for US Policy

Origins of the Crisis. The media has focused on the decision to admit the Shah to the United States as the event that triggered the Embassy takeover. In retrospect, however, we believe that symptoms of political disarray—the collapse of political authority following the fall of the monarchy, conflict over the goals of the revolution, and an institutionally weak leadership relying on techniques of mass mobilization to generate support and deflect popular dissatisfaction—were the major factors in the crisis. []

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Threats Posed by Militant Islam. The costs to Iran of the prolonged crisis might serve as a deterrent to other radical regimes tempted to flout generally accepted standards of international conduct. Rejection of diplomatic norms because they are a reflection of Western values imposed on the Islamic world, however, is an element of the Iranian revolutionary ideology. To fundamentalist groups elsewhere, the “lesson” of the hostage crisis might not be that it was highly costly to the state, but that it was a heroic example of defiance of the West by a group of believers unwilling to compromise and accept Western values. []

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A Model for Terrorist Operations. Terrorists seek to attract international attention to their cause by sudden, dramatic acts of violence such as assassinations or bombings or by hostage situations in which violence is threatened if conditions are not met before a specific deadline. The Iranian militants—with government cooperation once they had seized the Embassy and popular support for their cause—set no deadlines, prolonged the crisis, and conducted a sophisticated media campaign by releasing statements and captured documents at intervals to maintain public interest and government support. []

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Techniques of Crisis Resolution. US efforts to resolve the crisis were hindered by its political utility to Khomeini and to factions of the revolutionary leadership. In the short term, US policies were ineffective. US sanctions and diplomatic efforts imposed costs, however, that the Iranians had to weigh continually against the benefits of prolonging the crisis and the political risks of ending it. As the political utility of the crisis waned over time, economic sanctions, international isolation, and diplomatic pressure from intermediaries provided the incentive and the means for the Iranians to bring the crisis to an end. []

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Iran: The Seizure of the Embassy in Retrospect

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Background to the Embassy Seizure

The Embassy takeover followed months of instability that had continued after the collapse of political authority in Iran during the revolution. By the early fall of 1979 a referendum had been passed sanctioning the establishment of an Islamic republic, and a constituent assembly had been elected to debate the terms of a new constitution. The politically diverse coalition that had joined in opposition to the Shah had fragmented, however, over divisive foreign and domestic policy issues.

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Political turmoil and weak administrative authority contributed to the seizure of the Embassy and to the prolonged hostage crisis that followed:

- During late September and October 1979, schools and universities were reopening. Politics among rival Islamic and leftist student factions were at a high point, and clerical leaders feared that student unrest would undermine the regime's authority.
- Religious fervor, maintained at a high pitch since the revolution, was whipped up by the pilgrimage season, the climax of the religious year in the Islamic month of Muharram, and the beginning of a new century on the Islamic calendar.
- The Bazargan government, which had failed to deliver on the promises of the revolution and which had repeatedly shown itself powerless to defy the self-appointed revolutionary committees, was further weakened in October by a major political scandal.

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Student Unrest. The opening of Iranian universities between late September and mid-October after several weeks' delay was accompanied by persistent rumors that there would be trouble when classes started. The main Tehran universities as well as campuses elsewhere in Iran were in administrative and political disarray. Many professors had left the country, and

course curriculums were uncertain. New heads of universities had to deal with unruly committees set up in the colleges as well as with rival political groups among both students and faculty.

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A common concern was that the opening of schools would lead to agitation against the Khomeini regime. During the week before the occupation of the Embassy the Islamic Associations and Muslim student organizations at the University of Tehran, for example, addressed a letter to the Revolutionary Council charging that the revolution was on the brink of failure. The letter noted that the government had made no progress in meeting the revolution's promise of land reform, altering the balance of power in society, alleviating the housing shortage, or addressing a number of other problems.

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The government's control and influence over the university community was left uncertain after the death in September of Ayatollah Taleqani, the principal broker of the students' interests with the political and religious hierarchy. Repeated calls for unity between students and religious leaders during October reflected the clerical leaders' efforts to prevent the emergence of a student movement directed against the clergy. Clerical leaders probably overestimated the strength of their opposition—the students were by no means united against clerical participation in politics—but anticlerical student groups were active, contributing to the political ferment and the regime's fears for its own survival.

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Religious Fervor. The seizure of the Embassy came immediately after the 10 days marking events in the annual pilgrimage to Mecca and only a few weeks before the high point of the Shia religious year, the month of Muharram, when the martyrdom of the legitimate successors to Mohammad—in Shia eyes—is commemorated. The association of political goals with emotionally compelling religious themes has been a common aspect of politics during the revolution.

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Khomeini and other clerical leaders directly associated Iran's revolution with events on the religious calendar in several speeches in late October, stirring up popular support for revolutionary goals. Khomeini placed himself directly in the tradition of the martyred successors to Mohammad on 23 October when he commented on the approaching anniversary of the death of his son, whom he referred to as a saintly figure who had set an example for all Iranians. The effect of Khomeini's words was to renew religious and revolutionary enthusiasm. There were massive demonstrations throughout Iran in response to his call for unity against threats to the Islamic republic. [redacted]

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During the last week before the Embassy seizure, events on the religious calendar had strong associations with a more radical policy toward the United States. On 30 October, the ninth day of the *hajj*—the day when pilgrims gather at the hill of Arafat outside Mecca—Khomeini addressed the Muslims of the world, praising those who fought with faith and “defeated a great power.” On the next day Muslims mark the gathering of pilgrims at Mozdalefa, where stones are hurled at a place where Satan is said to have appeared and been driven away; Khomeini often referred to the United States as the “great Satan.” The final day of the *hajj* on 1 November, the Feast of Sacrifice, was marked in Iran by anti-American demonstrations in most of the major cities.

Government Weakness. Throughout September and October 1979, Prime Minister Bazargan's provisional government experienced setbacks that so weakened its authority that it was incapable of challenging the militants' occupation of the Embassy. Bazargan had been unsuccessful in bringing the numerous revolutionary committees in government ministries, the military, industry, and local administration under control. The government was widely regarded as ineffective and not entirely supported by Khomeini. Bazargan complained bitterly in public that his government was a “knife without a blade.” He continually counseled patience in the face of mounting demands for revolutionary change. [redacted]

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Bazargan's weakness was evident in early October when a government ban on unauthorized demonstrations, gatherings, and marches was ignored. On

6 October more than 4,000 unemployed demonstrated in front of the Labor Ministry, and a few days later hundreds of protestors staged a march in Tehran. At the same time, violence was continuing in several provincial areas including Kurdistan, Baluchistan, and Khuzestan. A political scandal in late October further weakened the government's authority. The Deputy Minister of Commerce went into hiding after the discovery of his involvement in a \$4 million fraud. [redacted]

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The government's weakness in dealing with students was demonstrated in early October when various student groups began seizing hotels in Tehran and other cities for use as dormitories. The Tehran prosecutor general protested the seizures but did not take steps to evict the students. The government was put in the position of having to defend the interests of property owners against the demands of students claiming to be revolutionary—they claimed to be acting against capitalism and imperialism—and was powerless to act. [redacted]

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The Shah's Arrival in the United States

The Shah's arrival in the United States on 22 October 1979 to undergo a medical examination in New York had little immediate impact in Iran. Public attention was focused on internal problems. The absence of a strong public reaction contributed to the apparent confidence of moderates in the provisional government—including Prime Minister Bazargan and Foreign Minister Yazdi—that they could weather any crisis resulting from the Shah's presence in the United States. [redacted]

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Iranian press treatment of the Shah's arrival in the United States was light and relatively objective throughout the period between 22 October and 4 November when the Embassy was seized. The day after the Shah's arrival in New York the Tehran newspapers carried wire service reports without comment, in most cases burying the story. One Farsi-language newspaper carried a front-page headline to the effect that the Shah had been given a residence permit in the United States, but the accompanying wire service story was short and placed in the back pages [redacted]

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A survey of the Islamic Republic Party's (IRP) Farsi-language daily newspaper between 22 October and 4 November reveals no significant effort to mobilize public sentiment against the United States because of the Shah. The Shah's travel was noted in a brief back-page article on 24 October which noted both that the Foreign Ministry had requested that the Shah not be allowed to engage in political activity and that the Shah had cancer. During the following 10 days, the IRP newspaper covered various speeches in which the Shah was mentioned and carried routine items alleging unspecified "US and Zionist plots" against Iran. The paper's announcement of demonstrations made no link, however, to the Shah's presence in the United States. [redacted]

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The first major demonstration to follow the Shah's arrival in the United States came on 26 October when millions of Iranians in Tehran and provincial cities marched in support of the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. The IRP called for the demonstrations, and numerous Islamic societies and organizations announced their support. In one of the few direct references to the Shah and the United States during the day's activities, IRP Chairman and Revolutionary Council leader Ayatollah Beheshti told a crowd at Tehran University that the Iranian people had suffered martyrdom under the Shah for decades and now the United States had welcomed him. Beheshti demanded that the United States clarify its position on the revolution in Iran. [redacted]

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A major demonstration called for by the IRP and the Militant Clergy Society occurred at the Embassy on 1 November to protest "antirevolutionary plots sponsored by Western imperialists," "imperialist policies of the British and US arresting Muslim Iranians," and "the US giving refuge to the deposed Shah." The IRP organizers announced the night before the demonstration that a planned march to the Embassy had been called off and that the marchers should instead move from initial gathering points for prayers to a public square in south Tehran. The announcement was repeated during the prayer services on the morning of 1 November. Nevertheless, a crowd numbering 4,000 or more gathered at the Embassy during the

day, chanting anti-American slogans. The crowd dispersed in the early afternoon. There is no evidence that this demonstration was a "dry run" for the demonstration on 4 November that preceded the attack on the Embassy. [redacted] 25X1

Government Reaction to the Shah's Arrival in the United States

The government's initial public comment indicated that Iran had accepted US assurances concerning the reasons for the Shah's travel to the United States. A Foreign Ministry spokesman said on 24 October that it was the government's understanding that the deposed Shah had gone to the United States only for medical treatment and that he and his wife had been given no right to engage in political activities. The spokesman added that the Shah was suffering from "terminal cancer." [redacted] 25X1

On 31 October, following what they claimed was a review of the Shah's medical records and the failure of Iranian physicians to gain direct access to the Shah to confirm reports about his health, the government delivered a formal protest to the Embassy. The note conveyed Iran's position that it "did not accept the American Government's excuses for granting entry permission to the deposed Shah." The government expected "that he should be expelled from the US immediately upon leaving the hospital." Foreign Ministry officials told the Embassy [redacted] that "outside pressures" for a stronger reaction were increasing, 25X1 implying that Khomeini might order a break in relations between Iran and the United States. [redacted]

Information available on planning for the Embassy takeover suggests that the preparations were intentionally concealed from anyone who might have opposed the plan and that the government was taken by surprise on 4 November. [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] the Bazargan government had no advance warning of the militants' seizure of the Embassy: 25X1 25X1

- Prime Minister Bazargan and Foreign Minister Yazdi left Tehran for Algeria where they met with senior US officials shortly before the Embassy takeover.

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- Minister of Justice Haj Seyed Javadi was uncertain how to deal with the Shah's arrival in the United States, had no plans, and was not coordinating with the clergy on the issue, [REDACTED]

- Sadeq Ghotbzadeh, then Director of Iranian Radio and Television and later Foreign Minister, said that when the Embassy was seized, he had no idea who the militants were, [REDACTED]

The cooperation of police and security forces in allowing the demonstrators unimpeded access to the Embassy compound on 4 November, however, suggests some degree of prior coordination at least at lower levels of administration. The general breakdown in government authority and the chaos in the bureaucracy that allowed various offices to operate virtually independent of central control suggest that it would have been possible, even likely, for local police around the Embassy to work out their own arrangement with the militants [REDACTED]

Khomeini and the Radical Clergy

Khomeini's increasingly inflammatory rhetoric following the Shah's arrival in the United States provided the militants with justification for seizing the Embassy, but we do not believe he ordered the attack. Analysis of Khomeini's statements indicates that his anger and fear that the presence of the Shah in the United States posed a threat to the revolution slowly grew with the prodding of more radical members of his entourage. There is conflicting evidence on whether the more radical clerics knew of plans for the Embassy occupation and so pressed Khomeini in order to prepare the way. It is likely, however, that some did know of the plan, while others did not but then quickly approved of the attack after it had taken place. [REDACTED]

The statement that the militants later cited as the basis for the seizure of the Embassy—Khomeini's charge to students to "expand with all your might your attacks on the US"—was not a speech, but rather a signed statement issued by Khomeini's office. We now believe such statements, which are clearer and more policy oriented than Khomeini's speeches,

reflect the views of members of his entourage who have pressed a certain view and then succeeded in getting the Ayatollah to sign, indicating his assent. [REDACTED]

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Khomeini's speeches during the period between the Shah's arrival in the United States and the attack on the Embassy give a clear indication that the influence of his more moderate advisers waned over time while more radical members of his entourage gained the ascendancy:

- On 24 October, in his first public statement about the Shah's travel in the United States, Khomeini focused on the issue of the Shah's wealth. The speech clearly reflected Foreign Minister Yazdi's influence, and there is no indication of concern that the Shah's presence in the United States posed a threat to the revolution.
- In a speech on 26 October Khomeini mentioned growing concern in Iran that there was a "plot" involved in the Shah's presence in the United States, but the balance of the speech dwelled on Khomeini's often-repeated theme that Iran would be better off if it could be totally separated from the United States.
- On 28 October Khomeini returned to the same theme, commenting that the argument that Iran needed the West was an illness with which Iranian society was afflicted. The nature of the speech suggests that contending factions in Khomeini's entourage—those favoring continuing ties with the United States and those opposed—were arguing their respective cases with Khomeini.
- By 30 October more radical, "revolutionary" themes became more prominent in Khomeini's pronouncements. He denounced the government bureaucracy and called for a purge of administrative agencies and the educational system.

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- Khomeini noted in a speech on 2 November that Iranian physicians had told him the Shah could have been treated elsewhere. He charged that this was evidence that "the great powers and Satans" wanted to use the Shah as a "tool." Khomeini referred to the Shah as a "corpse," however, and remarked that any attempt to use the Shah would be futile. [redacted]

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The speech on 2 November was Khomeini's last before the takeover, and his prescription for action remained vague. He "protested" the Shah's presence in the United States and "demanded" that the Shah and his wealth be returned. In contrast, the statement issued over Khomeini's signature on 3 November called for "students and theological students to expand with all their might their attacks against the US and Israel." The careful phrasing of the statement and the specific call for action suggest that the more radical clerics in Khomeini's entourage, seeking to stir up revolutionary fervor and to forge an alliance of convenience with student groups, had gained Khomeini's assent to their views. [redacted]

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Although Khomeini apparently approved the call for direct action, there is some evidence that he was wary of radical movements among students and that he feared losing control of the revolution. In his speech on 2 November, for example, he was critical of younger people who wanted to force the pace of the revolution. He noted that these radicals "should not constantly find fault with the courts, with the police force, with the Revolutionary Guards, with the government, and with other things. All this shows that they are lacking in political maturity." [redacted]

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Hojat-ol-Eslam Musavi-Khoeni who was to become the militants' clerical adviser, believed that Khomeini might not have approved of the militants' plan if he had been forewarned of it, but that he would go along with it after the fact. In an interview after the takeover, Khoeni said student leaders had approached him in October with their plan and asked him to obtain Khomeini's approval. Khoeni, by his own account, told them the plan was "in line with the implementation of the Imam's views," but that as leader of the revolution it might be "indecent" for

Khomeini to approve taking the hostages before the fact. Khoeni related that he told the students to keep their plan a secret. Once the operation was under way, if Khomeini disapproved, they could vacate the Embassy. [redacted]

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We lack information about the role of members of Khomeini's entourage—a loosely defined group of clerical and lay followers—prior to the Embassy takeover. Those closest to Khomeini, including members of his family, probably did not know of the militants' plans. His most prominent clerical followers may have known. In their [redacted] comments to US officials in late October, Ayatollahs Beheshti and Montazeri maintained a restrained tone in dealing with the issue of the Shah's presence in the United States. Beheshti later said that had the members of the Revolutionary Council known of the militants' plans in advance, they would not have given their permission. It seems unlikely, however, that the militants' clerical adviser Khoeni would have worked with them without informing Beheshti in at least general terms of their plans. [redacted]

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The Embassy Takeover

The crowd that approached the Embassy between 0900 and 1000 on 4 November may have numbered several thousand. Of these, a group of 300 to 400 entered the compound through the Embassy gates shortly after 1000. About noon, some gained access to the chancery building through a ground floor window, while others checked and cleared the other buildings on the compound. By 1330 they had control of the compound and by 1500 had taken the Embassy staff hostage. The 1400 Tehran Radio news carried a report that a group calling itself "The Muslim Student Followers of the Line of the Imam" had occupied the Embassy. [redacted]

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The evidence remains unclear on the militants' specific motivations for the occupation. One of the militants claimed that planning for the occupation began "about a week" before the event but gave no details on the reasons for the decision. Another of the

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The matter was brought up by some of the reliable students of the Islamic societies of the universities who said that as long as Bazargan continues to demonstrate a lack of ability, the waves of discontent would increase. []

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If we do not do anything, the Mujahedin and other leftist groups will do something. Thus, on the morning of the fourth of November, a group of 400 people set out to put this plan into effect. A large number of them, like me, were unaware of what was going on behind the scenes, and the general feeling was that it was necessary to take some steps against America. []

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It was established that the young people of each university (Tehran, Industrial, Polytechnic, and National) should separately come to the Bahar cross-road, and from there we would head for the Embassy. It was emphasized that no one had the right to carry weapons. []

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In order to prevent the influence and participation of other students . . . they had given each one of us little cards which specified our later duties in the Embassy. They also gave us special armbands which we were to wear throughout the march. In addition, in order to separate our line from others, we also had pictures of the Imam which we had to pin on our chests. This was to prevent anyone else from entering our ranks. The movement of the young people against the crimes of America had begun. []

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—One of the militants

militants said that students from several universities worked on the plans for "about 10 days." The group decided that 4 November was the most appropriate day for a demonstration and occupation of the Embassy because the date marked the anniversary of Khomeini's exile from Iran 14 years before. The date also marked the first anniversary of the Tehran University confrontation that led to the installation of the Azhari military government and the last months of the Shah's rule. []

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The timing of the militants' decision to begin planning for an occupation of the Embassy suggests that the Shah's arrival in the United States was one catalyst for the event. Another major factor was what the militants perceived as growing pragmatism in the Bazargan government's relations with the United States. The Embassy seizure was designed to create a crisis in US-Iranian relations which would stop the US "plot" to redirect the revolution along lines acceptable to the West. []

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A number of parochial issues may also have been involved. The militants' clerical mentor, Khoeni, claimed later that the occupation was calculated to generate support for the students and opposition to groups attempting to have the universities closed. The militants' eighth public statement, issued the day after the takeover, notes that "any act to close the schools and universities . . . is condemned." []

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The militants' first public statement, issued within an hour after the Embassy takeover—suggesting that it had been prepared in advance—contained no explicit demands and attempted to portray the seizure of the Embassy as a protest demonstration. The militants quoted the statement issued by Khomeini's office on 3 November calling on the students to "expand their attacks" on the United States to force the United States "to extradite the Shah." Their careful use of this statement appears to have been an attempt to prevent a move against them by associating themselves with Khomeini's order. The balance of the militants' first communique asserted that they had seized the Embassy in an effort to focus world attention on their "protests" against the United States. []

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The Militants' Initial Goals

The militants' first objective was to gain Khomeini's support for their radical interpretation of his views, and they were careful to avoid anything that could provide Khomeini or Bazargan with an excuse to move against them. Because the hostage-taking was their greatest vulnerability, they moved quickly to make it politically difficult for anyone to force the release of the hostages or to discredit their action. They referred to the hostage-taking as an attempt to

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Figure 1. The US Embassy compound in Tehran

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carry out "the will of the Iranian people" and left the fate of the hostages to "the will of the nation." One of the militants, interviewed 12 hours after the Embassy takeover, noted, "I should mention that my friends entered the Embassy as demonstrators and not for a military takeover . . . wherever the action leads to, the final decision will be with the people . . . whether to keep (the hostages) until the Shah returns or whether to let them go . . . whether there will be an Embassy or not will depend on them."

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Several statements issued by the militants on 4 November indicate their tactical concern to head off any attempt by security forces to remove them from the Embassy compound. The militants announced that they had encountered resistance but had "patiently tolerated great pain and treated it in an Islamic manner." They noted that they had taken hostages but that "no violent action has been taken against them." They praised the Revolutionary Guards for keeping order outside the Embassy, calling them "true supporters of the revolution" and saying that the Guards "understand our action well." The militants quickly announced discovery of "evidence" that the Embassy was an "espionage center."

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The militants publicly adopted the uncompromising position that the hostages would be released when the Shah was returned to Iran only after Khomeini's office issued a policy statement on 7 November. The statement probably reflected the influence of the more radical members of Khomeini's entourage. It noted that a US special representative was on his way to Iran and that Khomeini would not meet him. The provisions of the statement prevented any member of the Revolutionary Council or other "responsible officials" from meeting the US representative and set Iran's terms: "Should the United States hand over to Iran the deposed Shah . . . and give up espionage against our movement, the way to talks would be opened." The militants quickly supported the demand.

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The Militants Win Support

Several key groups and individuals gave strong support to the militants almost immediately after the Embassy takeover. The theological center in Qom—an apparently strong influence on Khomeini—condemned relations between Iran and the United States. Ayatollah Beheshti, addressing the constituent assembly, acknowledged that diplomats should be protected,

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Figure 2. Flag burning on US Embassy wall.

but supported the Embassy takeover on the grounds that the United States had admitted the Shah. Ayatollah Montazeri, the clerical leader of Tehran and at that time Khomeini's apparent political heir, supported the occupation. Revolutionary Guard leader Lahuti said that the Guards were prepared to defend the militants from any attempt to move against them. Islamic societies and groups in a number of provincial centers announced their support for the militants.

Mass demonstrations in front of the Embassy on the day of the takeover continued after the militants had entered the compound. Many of the demonstrators were probably in the streets because of a rally called by the Islamic Republic Party (IRP) to mark the anniversary of the Tehran University confrontation. All of the routes of march given in the IRP newspaper on 3 November indicated the university as the point of convergence, but news broadcasts of the takeover drew some of the crowds to the Embassy. At mid-morning on the day after the takeover, a larger crowd, estimated at over 6,000, formed at the Embassy, and several religious leaders were present, leading prayers. Leftist groups, including the Mujahedin, organized their followers to keep a constant presence in front of the Embassy.

On 5 November Islamic student groups in Tabriz and Shiraz demonstrated their support for the militants by seizing the unoccupied US consulates in those cities and issuing demands similar to those made by the militants in Tehran. Members of these groups may later have come to the Embassy compound in Tehran—there were student groups from the universities of Tabriz and Shiraz among the militants at a later stage—but we lack evidence that there was a clear link between the Embassy takeover and the seizure of the consulates.

Another group seized the British Embassy in Tehran on 5 November but vacated it the same day after failing to win public support for their action. On 6 November two groups seized Iraqi consulates in Kermanshah and Khoramshahr but vacated them after the Iraqis responded by seizing Iranian consulates in Iraq and after Khomeini issued instructions calling a halt to the seizures.

Over the following days and weeks crowds continued to demonstrate in front of the Embassy, drawn by religious and revolutionary fervor, the attention of the news media, and active organizational efforts by groups supporting the takeover.

The militants themselves called for demonstrations on several occasions, although there were indications that they were concerned to keep the demonstrations manageable because they feared an unruly mob might overrun the compound.

The Fall of Bazargan's Government

With mounting demonstrations of public support, the militants were emboldened by the second day of the occupation to begin making open political demands rather than only "protests." They remained careful, however, to disassociate themselves from any political "line" other than that of Khomeini. They denied connections with any "group, organization, or party" and indicated that their political positions were based

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on Islam and the thought of the Ayatollah. They went on to say that they had seized the Embassy in order to:

- "Force the leaders of step-by-step politics to adopt a revolutionary policy in the direction of the demands of the majority of the oppressed Iranian nation."
- "Censure the suppressive US relations with Iran and cut the military, political, and economic dependence by expelling American consultants; dissolving bilateral contacts between Iran and the United States; and abolishing the dependent capitalist system." [redacted]

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Following a visit to the Embassy compound by Ahmad Khomeini on the second day—which served as public confirmation of the Ayatollah's support for the occupation—the militants went further and attempted to put Khomeini in the position of supporting them against the Bazargan government. The militants referred to the meeting between Bazargan and US officials in Algiers: "How can we tolerate this, when the responsible officials sit around one table with American wolves, while you angrily shout that the United States is the major enemy of the Muslim and oppressed masses?" [redacted]

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On 6 November the government resigned, and its authority was vested in the Revolutionary Council at Khomeini's order. The broad public support for the militants' seizure of the Embassy and for the radical break the militants advocated in relations with the United States had proved the final blow for Bazargan's cabinet. Bazargan's absence from the country during the two days preceding the Embassy takeover—he returned from Algiers at approximately the same time the militants were moving into the Embassy compound—had made it all the more difficult for him to deal with the crisis. In any case, by 6 November public opinion clearly favored the militants, and the government had no alternative but to resign. [redacted]

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Khomeini's Reaction to the Takeover

Khomeini's public support of the occupation made it virtually impossible for any group to act against the militants without his explicit order. His backing reflected his hatred for the Shah, his hatred for the

United States and the influence of Western values on Iran, and his desire to stay in step with public opinion. In addition Khomeini supported the militants as a means of assuring the broadest possible public approval at a time when the constitution establishing the institutions of the Islamic republic was about to be submitted to public referendum, and at a time when public dissatisfaction with the failures of the revolution was growing. [redacted] 25X1

Khomeini's public response reflected two additional themes in his thinking: the powerlessness of the United States to confront a revolutionary Iran, and the strength of Iran as a nation of Muslims willing to accept martyrdom. The hostage crisis provided an occasion for Khomeini to draw on the strong religious and emotional currents of the crusade against the Shah by dwelling on the martyrdom theme. [redacted]

Despite his support for the militants, Khomeini was wary of losing control over the pace of the revolution. Two days after the Embassy seizure he chided a group of students from the University of Isfahan, lecturing them on the dangers of chaos. The speech may have reflected a concession to departing Prime Minister Bazargan, since his remarks on unwarranted seizures of property and the importance of legal procedures reflected Bazargan's thinking. But the nature of Khomeini's comment suggests that he was addressing the militants as well: 25X1

I advise you to be careful and not do something that will let the world say that a bunch of savages have gathered together in a desert, in Iran, and everybody does what he likes; that there is no law, no religious principles, no courts, no investigation. . . . You should not do something that will let them say Iran is following the law of the jungle and that we are savages. . . . I have to tell you that if you wish your country to be independent and free and an Islamic country, the first thing that is incumbent upon all of us is to prevent disorder. [redacted]

In a speech to the same group a day later Khomeini lashed out at young critics who charged that the revolution had not gone far enough. He reminded

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them that the monarchy was gone, that the large superpower presence was gone, and that political freedom to hold meetings such as the one he was addressing had been secured. Khomeini warned against disruptions by the left and went on to urge the establishment of the institutions of the Islamic republic. His determination to decide the pace of the revolution himself and to prevent groups acting in his name from achieving their own ends remained constant throughout the hostage crisis. [REDACTED]

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Government Assistance to the Militants

Throughout the hostage crisis the militants experienced both cooperation and conflict in their relations with the government and with Khomeini. The prolonged occupation would not have been possible without the continuing cooperation of a number of government offices while the political successors of the Bazargan cabinet argued over the fate of the hostages. The complex pattern of this assistance to the militants resulted from informal connections between the militants and Iranian officials and from the administrative chaos that made it possible for government offices to operate virtually independent of central control. [REDACTED]

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One of the senior Embassy officers held hostage characterized the political dynamics of the 14 months of the crisis by noting the extremely fragmented authority of the Islamic republic. "Everyone was in charge, and no one was in charge." The significance of the militants' use of Iran's civilian airline to transport blindfolded and bound hostages within the country, for example, was less the fact that the airline was state run and more that the militants used it unchallenged. Similarly:

- Revolutionary Guards and other security forces provided security for the Embassy compound and assisted during the dispersal of the hostages early in the occupation and after the aborted US rescue mission in April 1980.
- The judiciary system, including the Public Prosecutor's office and prison administrators, provided various kinds of assistance including housing many of

the hostages in two Tehran prisons for prolonged periods. The militants told the hostages that the Public Prosecutor's office and the Ministry of Justice were very much on the militants' side.

- One of the militants' committees within the Embassy maintained direct contact with the Ministry of National Guidance. Through this channel the militants learned quickly about what foreign news agencies and newspapers were reporting about the hostage crisis. In addition Iranian news media served as a continuing platform for the militants to focus attention on the Embassy by releasing statements and translated documents taken from Embassy files.
- There were contacts between members of the militants' leadership group and demonstration organizers probably associated with the IRP. One of the militants later related an incident in which members of the leadership group called on organized street gangs (the "hezbollahis" or "Party of God") to stage demonstrations in their support during an internal quarrel.

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The Militants' Relations With the Revolutionary Council

Flushed with their success in having contributed to the fall of the Bazargan government, the militants from the earliest days of the crisis denied that the

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Revolutionary Council had any authority over them. They issued statements calling on the Council to carry out its duties in a revolutionary manner after Khomeini delegated executive authority to the Council on 6 November. The militants repeatedly said they would not obey an order from the Council to release the hostages unless they received explicit instructions from Khomeini to do so. They frustrated at least two efforts by the Council to assume control of the hostages [redacted]

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Several of the militants' leaders apparently maintained contact with Ayatollah Beheshti—and protected his interests by preventing the release of Embassy documents covering his meetings with US officials. Conflict among the militants over policy toward Beheshti and the IRP, however, reportedly led to a major factional dispute and the subsequent "resignation" of some of the militants. Documents relating to Beheshti's meetings with US officials were later made public by one of the militants who was critical of the policy decisions made by the leadership group. [redacted]

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The militants' clerical mentor, Khoeni, together with Ali Tehrani, another prominent cleric, may have attempted a political power play against Beheshti by threatening to reveal the documents shortly before Iran's presidential elections. Beheshti clearly won the match, reportedly forcing Khoeni's resignation from a leading position with the Iranian Radio and Television organization and dispatching Tehrani to "supervise" presidential election balloting in Mashhad. As a result release of the documents was held up, some of the militants left the Embassy, and Khoeni apparently moved to restore good relations with Beheshti. [redacted]

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The more radical clerics used the militants and the hostage crisis as a focus of popular attention in their efforts to weaken their rivals politically. Tagging moderates with the unpopular position of being "soft on the US" helped assure the radical clergy's rise to political dominance. In addition, leaders of the Qom theological center instigated demonstrations at the Embassy during the month of Muharram (late November and early December 1979) to keep popular

enthusiasm at a high pitch for the impending referendum on the constitution. One of the militants later complained bitterly that the hostage crisis had been used by others to suit their own political ends. [redacted]

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The Militants' Relations With Khomeini

Khomeini maintained contact with the militants through his son Ahmad and through Khoeni. Characteristically, given his style of leadership, age, and health, he appears to have acted primarily as the final arbiter of disputes and probably was not consulted on day-to-day decisions. Khomeini met directly with leaders of the militants on several occasions, continued to express support for the takeover as "the will of the Iranian people," and supported some of their specific decisions over the objections of members of his government. Nevertheless, there were several instances of conflict between the militants and Khomeini. [redacted]

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The militants manipulated Khomeini by stirring up popular support for their own radical interpretation of his views. They formulated their demands—the return of the Shah and his wealth and an end to US "interference" in Iran—by quoting from Khomeini's statements. Their insistence that no compromise was possible emulated Khomeini's tactic of achieving political victories by refusing to compromise. By mobilizing popular opinion to support these radical strains in Khomeini's thought, the militants limited the ability of Bani-Sadr and others to make concessions to the United States and made it politically dangerous for Khomeini to support a more moderate course. [redacted]

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Khomeini made at least two public statements in the early stages of the crisis suggesting that he might consider policies less extreme than those advocated by the militants. In an interview on 18 November 1979, he responded to a question about future relations with the United States by saying that some degree of relations was possible provided the United States ceased its "interference" in Iranian affairs. He made clear on several occasions that it would be the new legislature and not the militants who would decide the hostages' fate. In addition Khomeini maintained some political distance from the militants by referring to them only in general terms as "our young people" and by frustrating their goals at several points. [redacted]

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25X1 Khomeini's order that American clergymen be allowed to visit the hostages at Christmas 1979 apparently went against the wishes of the militants. In return, on one occasion the militants refused to allow an American reporter into the Embassy compound after Khomeini had approved the meeting. In early January 1980 Khomeini frustrated attempts by the militants to have the three Americans remaining in the Foreign Ministry building transferred to the Embassy compound. [REDACTED]

Khomeini balanced unfavorable decisions on the militants' requests with more favorable positions, following his practice of keeping a balance between competing factions and reflecting shifting balances within his entourage. In February 1980, for example, Ahmad Khomeini met with the militants to discuss a response to UN Secretary General Waldheim's efforts to resolve the crisis. The militants emerged from the meeting arm in arm with Ahmad and shortly thereafter announced that neither they nor Khomeini would accept any compromise. In March and April 1980 Khomeini refused to support the Revolutionary Council's attempts to win control over the hostages. [REDACTED]

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The Militants:

Origins, Organization, and Ideology

25X1 The militants who seized the Embassy were not an established political or guerrilla group. During the 14 months of the occupation a small leadership cadre and a core group of 40 to 50 followers maintained strict discipline over their more transient larger membership. A major factor in the leadership's ability to maintain discipline was the lack of political sophistication of many of their followers. Most of the militants were provincials who were studying in Tehran, and with the exception of the leadership they were neither well traveled nor well read. [REDACTED]

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Several aspects of the militants' occupation of the Embassy differentiate the hostage crisis from terrorist operations of the past 15 years:

- Many of the militants' decisions, including the decision to prolong the occupation and hold the hostages in exchange for the return of the Shah,

appear to have been ad hoc responses to developments outside the Embassy. There were internal disputes in reaching these policy decisions which led to the "resignations" of some of the militants.

- The broad public support the militants received and the active cooperation from government security forces removed the siege atmosphere of a terrorist incident.
- The militants came and left the Embassy at will, with only a few restrictions to maintain security. Of the approximately 400 militants, a quarter were 25X1 always "off duty," at which time they were permitted to go home or to their dormitories to change their clothes and rest [REDACTED]

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The average age of the militants' leadership was about 28 years, and of their followers about 22. Approximately a fourth of them were women. Most of the militants were students of science, including mathematics, chemistry, engineering, and medicine. Some of the older militants appear to have been recent students or graduate students who had participated in the politics of the revolution but had not established themselves in any regular vocation [REDACTED]

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Origins. The origins of the group calling itself "The Muslim Student Followers of the Line of the Imam" were in the Islamic student organizations of the universities in Tehran and the major provincial centers. Meetings with Khomeini and other senior clerical leaders in seminars and political rallies provided the initial setting for coordination between the organizations in different universities. Khoeni, the militants' clerical leader, claimed that five to seven students provided the nucleus of a planning group for the Embassy seizure and that they discussed their ideas with him because of a previous association with him. [REDACTED]

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The militants were from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds. At least two leaders of the group were from middle class Tehran families and had spent extensive periods in the United States as students.

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25X1 Many others were from the more traditional sectors of the Iranian population—the bazaar and the lower middle class where Islam is strong and Western values are resented. []

occupied the compound for several months after the attack in February 1979 on the Embassy, although we cannot confirm this point.¹ Duties for the members of the occupying group had been specified in advance, and they had taken precautions to assure that members of rival groups could not easily attach themselves to the militants once they had control of the compound. []

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25X1 The Islamic student organizations on the university campuses which brought these students together are loosely structured and appear in some cases to be ad hoc gatherings that participate in demonstrations or discussions with clerical leaders. The Islamic groups were in some cases organized after the revolution, but some were originally established during the Shah's rule as a recruitment mechanism for the Mujahedin, the Islamic-Marxist terrorist group []

Leadership of the militants and basic policy decisions were in the hands of a five- to eight-man Central Council, or "Council of Cooperation." Below this leadership group were several committees responsible for information and public relations, translation of Embassy documents, logistics, and security. The militants' clerical leader, Khoeni, provided general guidance. [] Khoeni spoke to the group when there were differences over an issue, ostensibly relaying Khomeini's comments but frequently adding his own, and usually backing the decisions of the Central Council against dissent from other militants. []

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25X1 Some of the militants were drawn from one Mujahedin-associated group at the Tehran University of Technology. Seven or eight of the militants were identified as seniors from the university who were members of the Mujahedin-e-Islam, one of the Islamic subgroups of the Mujahedin. This group dominated a dormitory on the campus built to accommodate poorer students from remote rural areas. The organization and the students of the dormitory that it dominated may have provided more than the seven or eight militants who were positively identified as its members. []

The militants devised a number of means of reaching a consensus on policy decisions. The Central Council members, who came from each of the universities represented among the militants, originally met with the students from their universities. Dissatisfaction with this mechanism resulted in the creation of a short-lived "Council of the Forearm," which had eight members—two from each of the major Tehran universities—and was supposed to meet regularly with the Central Council. Some of the militants apparently charged that the new council had been selected from among the close friends of members of the Central Council and consequently did not broaden the scope of representation. In addition, group meetings in which all the militants participated were held, but there was apparently continuing dissatisfaction that policy decisions were made with only the appearance of consensus. []

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25X1 Islamic organizations from other universities that provided recruits for the militant leaders who planned the takeover apparently had no association with established political groups. None of the National University students were affiliated with any organized political group, [] The militants carefully avoided identification with any group outside the Embassy, including the Mujahedin, and there were indications that some of the more leftist militants who advocated closer relations with the Mujahedin or disagreed with policy decisions by the leadership were driven out of the Embassy compound []

25X1 **Organization.** The militants were well prepared for more than a sit-in or protest demonstration when they entered the Embassy compound. They came equipped with blindfolds and bindings for use in what they had planned as a several-day takeover. They had detailed knowledge of the Embassy grounds—possibly acquired from members of the irregular force that

¹ We lack information that would establish a direct link between the seizure of the Embassy in November and the attack on the compound nine months earlier. The earlier attack served as a precedent, however, establishing that a group could attack the Embassy with relative impunity. []

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Figure 3. Hojat-ol-Eslam Mu-
savi-Khoeni, the militants'
clerical mentor. [redacted]

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Several additional councils with representation from each university were created to deal with the practical concerns of the committees. Differences developed over the policy on releasing captured Embassy documents, for example, and a council was formed consisting of one person from each university to debate the question. An "activities committee," charged with responsibility for security and holding the hostages, had a membership of 40 to 50 people headed by a student from the Industrial University. A four-member representation council later took control of policy for this group. The "services committee," which had responsibility for preparing publications and posters and issuing communiques and for maintaining contact with the Ministry of National Guidance, was ultimately taken over by the Central Council. [redacted]

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Ideology. The shared conviction among the militants that the Iranian revolution had stalled in a reformist phase reflected a more developed ideology articulated by the militants' leaders that contained elements of both leftist idealism and Khomeini's populist Islam. Contrary to press reports that the militants were

The militants' ideology mixed Islamic and leftist themes. Their description of an "Islamic" economy, for example, was based on Khomeini's populist rhetoric, Marxist ideas, and Leninist "anti-imperialism."

We believe that the individual, the worker, should have the right of ownership of the means of production. He should also have the right to own the land. But this should be done in the framework of collective effort. For example, the peasant should have his land, but he should share with the community the water, the tools, and the machines.

During the Shah's rule, the peasants starved because of his "agricultural reform"; his "reform" made Iran dependent on food imports. We should build up our own agriculture, our own economy. We should stop the economic dependence of Iran from abroad.

There is a great difference between the Islamic economic system and the socialist one. Islamic economy has a direction which is Allah. Socialism does not have such a noble principle. In Islam, if we work to produce better products, it is only through the will of God. If we struggle for a better life, if we work harder, it is according to the will of God. This economy has a purpose. The socialist one does not.

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Islamic zealots and therefore could not be Marxists, the militants' ideology did not exclude Marxist ideas. Indeed, a mix of "leftist" and "rightist" themes is common among Iranian student radical movements and guerrilla groups. [redacted]

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The dominant element of the militants' thought—which fueled their determination to retain control over the hostages and prolong the crisis—was a "revolutionary" naivete, a belief that refusal to compromise would ensure the success of their goals. The militants saw the world in black and white. One of the militants interviewed several months after the take-over referred to the Shah and the United States in

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25X1 exaggerated terms: "No friendship with the person who killed 60,000 of our people. No compromise with the country which has ruined our agriculture and industry." [redacted]

In addition, the militants saw the results of their actions in sweeping terms: "When the Shah is returned to Iran, imperialism goes down the drain. Finished. The prestige of imperialism in all the regions will break. Sadat will not be a puppet anymore. Hussein will not be a puppet anymore. Why should they be puppets? They will know that their end will be like the Shah's." [redacted]

25X1 In their refusal to compromise and their exaggerated vision of the impact of their action, the militants reacted with bitterness to the discovery that the Embassy occupation had become a pawn in the power struggle between rival political factions. One of the militants wrote of his reaction to being told by a member of the Revolutionary Council that the hostage crisis had helped ensure the ratification of the new constitution: "This blow was sufficient to reveal many of our illusions. Had we taken the American spies hostage so that the constitutional law could be ratified or to silence the voice of the people? Had we not become the tools of forces behind the political curtain? Had we not been used to remove rivalries from the field?" [redacted]

25X1 The militants propagated their views through a series of public statements released to the media and carefully controlled interviews with the press. Although they hoped to have a major impact on national policy, they were often preoccupied with tactical concerns. Their calls for demonstrations, threats to try the hostages, and release of classified documents appear to have been directed primarily at keeping public interest—and Khomeini's attention—focused on the Embassy. The militants recognized that their ability to play a role in national policy depended on the extent to which they could mobilize public opinion and extract statements of support from Khomeini in order to exert pressure on clerical and government leaders. [redacted]

The militants' 21st public statement, issued four days after the takeover, called on the American people to support them, suggesting the degree of their euphoria over their success. The wording of the statement also suggested an unconscious identification of the militant leaders with the radical students who participated in campus politics in the United States during the 1960s. The message read in part:

If we are sending you, the American nation, a message today, it is because our leader, Iman Khomeini, and the nation of Iran have always separated your account from that of the US Government. We believe you can pass a fair judgment, and that is why we ask you, the American nation, to listen to us with sincerity and pass your judgment on them.

O nation of America, why do you allow the US Government to use your name and your flag in its Embassies in countries all over the world—Embassies that have become centers of espionage for the CIA spies—to threaten the independence and freedom of freedom-fighting countries?

If today our nation is burning the American flag, it is to make you realize that these conspirators who are at the top of the US Government have turned your flag, which to you represents independence and freedom, into a symbol of crime, plunder, and usury. It is your duty, O American nation, to stop them from tarnishing your flag so disgracefully.

O American nation, it has not been long since you were witness to the widespread and persistent demonstrations in support of the brave nation of Vietnam and your complaints against the intervention of the US Government in that country. You can show that, as Iman Khomeini has repeatedly emphasized, the account of the nation of America is separate from that of the US Government.

We call on you once again to demonstrate to the people of the world that you are freedom loving. Halt the plot of Carter's government in Iran and support the just demand of the Iranian nation concerning the return of the Shah to Iran.

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The militants' concern to protect their tactical position contributed to their decision to avoid identifying themselves with any political group outside the Embassy compound and their insistence on identifying themselves with Khomeini alone. In an interview one of the militants frankly admitted that "the people will support us only as long as we do not belong to a particular organization." Their tactical concerns also introduced an element of caution into their policy decisions. Habibollah Payman, a radical political leader who acted as an occasional adviser to the militants, complained that if he had had control over the group, "they would not have yielded to pressures from some of the clergy and from Khomeini not to publicize all of the documents in the Embassy files."

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The militants' dependence on public support forced them to back down on several occasions when Khomeini and public opinion turned against them. Their threat to try the hostages, initially made in November and continued in December 1979, was quietly shelved when Khomeini and the public focused on the Christmas visit of the American clergymen and the arrival in January of UN Secretary General Waldheim. In March they offered—possibly as a ploy—to transfer control of the hostages to the Revolutionary Council when it appeared that Bani-Sadr was gaining political momentum with his charge that the militants constituted a "government within a government." The militants retracted the "offer" after public demonstrations of support stalled and ultimately frustrated the actual transfer.

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Foreign Involvement

An exhaustive review of the evidence provides no indication that any foreign government or political organization was directly involved in planning or carrying out the takeover of the Embassy, or that a foreign government or political organization significantly influenced policy decisions by the militants during the prolonged hostage crisis. We conclude that the seizure of the Embassy was conceived, planned, and directed by Iranian militants with the support or acquiescence of Iranian political and clerical leaders.

Government assistance to the militants and the facilities available to them on the Embassy compound—including supplies of cash, food, and communications gear—precluded the need for foreign support once the seizure had been accomplished.

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USSR. The Soviets spoke approvingly of the Embassy takeover from the outset and later attempted to postpone a settlement of the issue by encouraging the Iranians to insist on tough financial terms. Despite the USSR's misgivings about the violation of diplomatic immunity and its fear of massive US military intervention to free the hostages, the Soviets decided that the hostage crisis was, for them, a positive development. Not only would the crisis serve to consolidate anti-Western views in Tehran and reduce US prestige, but it might also provide opportunities for the USSR to expand its influence.

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The Soviet-sponsored radio facility "National Voice of Iran," broadcasting from Baku, indicated support for the Embassy occupation and the goals of the militants the day after the takeover. The broadcast called for "the eradication of all the evil vestiges of the domination of US imperialism in the country." Moscow paid only lipservice to the various diplomatic efforts to free the hostages. The Soviets helped the Iranians frustrate the impact of Western economic sanctions by allocating scarce rail transit resources to transport Iranian goods. Once the Soviets were reasonably certain there would be no massive US military intervention to free the hostages, they attempted to portray themselves as the defenders of Iranian interests and offered arms aid.

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PLO. Fatah officials initially attempted to mediate the crisis, hoping to improve the PLO's image in the United States and strengthen their ties with Iran. Public statements during this effort by Yasir Arafat and his colleagues denying a mediation role and stressing PLO support for Iran were designed to ensure Fatah's continued access to Iranian officials and to prevent the militants from misinterpreting Fatah's motives. Following the failure of their initiative, the PLO generally disassociated itself from the hostage crisis. Fatah representatives attended the

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25X1 militant-organized Conference of Liberation Movements in Tehran, but one of the militants commented that "the encounter with the Palestinians was not completely friendly and revolutionary and was marred by pressure and threats." [redacted]

25X1 **Others.** The militants' attempts to associate themselves with world revolutionary movements received some media attention but appear to have been unsuccessful in substance. The four-day Conference of Liberation Movements in January 1980 resulted in a communique attacking the United States, supporting the PLO, and obliquely critical of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. One of the militants commented that in order to make arrangements for the meeting, the organizing committee had to call on the assistance of radical leaders outside the Embassy because the militants themselves lacked contacts. Two militants were sent to Algeria to meet with several groups, but they "did not know how to encounter a revolutionary country" and so "annoyed the Algerians." The atmosphere at the Conference, according to this militant, was "very bad." [redacted]

25X1 The militants received basic training from a variety of sources. Some were trained in the use of the kind of light arms employed in the Embassy seizure by the Revolutionary Guards. Some of the Revolutionary Guards in turn had been trained by Palestinians; however, there is no evidence that the Palestinians were directly involved in training the militants. One of the militants claimed to have fought with the Palestinians and to have spent time in an Israeli prison, although we cannot confirm this claim. Some of the militants may have participated in radical student politics while studying in the United States. [redacted]

25X1 [redacted] the 16 students who worked together translating Embassy documents were members of the Confederation of Iranian Students, the anti-Shah student group active in the United States and Europe during the Shah's regime. [redacted]

The Militants' Vulnerabilities

25X1 During the 14 months of the hostage crisis, diplomatic efforts and attempts by moderate leaders within Iran to take control of the hostages proved ineffective. The militants were forced to back down on a number of

issues—they shelved their threats to try the hostages; admitted the American clergy, the Red Cross, and others to see the hostages; and failed in their effort to move the three Americans at the Foreign Ministry to the Embassy—but public and political support secured their position. Backed by Khomeini, they had few vulnerabilities:

- *World opinion.* UN resolutions, judgments by the World Court, and approaches by the diplomatic community proved ineffective. The militants and the lay and clerical hardliners rejected international law as a tool of the powerful to dominate the weak. International attention, no matter how adverse, fueled the militants' sense of self-importance.
- *Humanitarian pleas.* The militants' vulnerability to the charge that the hostages were being mistreated was indicated by their decision to allow the visits of clergymen and others. Nevertheless, Khomeini's frequent assertions that the hostages were well provided for diminished the impact of these charges within Iran. Khomeini responded to a humanitarian appeal from the Pope by charging that the Iranian people had suffered under the Pahlavi dynasty for 50 years and the Pope had never intervened.
- *Islamic law.* Khomeini and the militants appear to have been sensitive to some extent to the charge that the hostage-taking was contrary to Islamic law, and they repeatedly attempted to make the case that the Embassy was a "center of espionage" and therefore exempt from these provisions. But appeals from Muslim leaders were ineffective. Khomeini, who saw himself as the leading Islamic jurisprudent, would not be bound by provisions of law that he could rationalize away.
- *Sanctions and other coercive measures.* Sanctions and threats of the use of force appear ultimately to have influenced the decision of the Iranian leadership to move toward releasing the hostages. On the other hand, the immediate impact of the threat of force was to prompt Khomeini to invoke the theme of martyrdom, rallying support and stirring up anti-American feeling. The argument that the hostage

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crisis was harmful to Iranian interests appeared to have made little impact on the militants, but the threat of force did influence them in several ways. They reportedly decided to continue the occupation despite the possibility of armed conflict only after prolonged and highly emotional debates. To minimize the risks they took rudimentary security precautions in and around the Embassy compound.

- *The rescue mission.* Immediately following the rescue mission, the militants abandoned the plan of defending the compound and adopted the tactic of dispersing the hostages in order to frustrate another rescue effort. Between April and the release in January, groups of hostages were shuttled between various provincial cities, and most were transferred to two prisons in the Tehran area.

The political consequences of the rescue mission were mixed. The news of the attempt redirected public attention to the crisis, and rival factions among the leadership attempted to extract maximum political benefit from the failure of the mission and the failure of Bani-Sadr's government to prevent the intrusion of US forces into Iranian territory. On the other hand, the use of the military appears to have reminded Iranian leaders of the potential costs of prolonging the crisis and probably contributed to the eventual decision to move toward a resolution.

- *Declining public interest.* As public interest in the hostage crisis waned within Iran, the militants became more vulnerable to government attempts to take control of the hostages. Without an explicit order from Khomeini to transfer the hostages, however, the militants were able to defy the government while at the same time renewing public attention to the issue and lessening their own weakness.

The militants' greatest vulnerability was to the charge that they defied the government and so contributed to the continuing chaos in Iran by adding to the problem of multiple centers of authority. Khomeini addressed this problem by balancing the competing factions: supporting the militants, but making clear that the legislature would make the final decision on the hostages. The militants responded by attempting to

mobilize public pressure on the legislature to support them. The new Majlis convened on 28 May 1980, and the militants immediately addressed a message to the representatives noting that Khomeini had supported the occupation and that the hostage question was the "great test" of the Majlis to demonstrate the power of Islam. [REDACTED]

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Movement toward release of the hostages began only after Khomeini, hardliners in his entourage, and the institutions of the government all agreed that the priority of the war with Iraq, the increasing cost in terms of Iran's isolation, and the declining political utility of holding the hostages made it time to bring the crisis to an end. When the consensus emerged in September 1980—indicated by the statement issued over Khomeini's signature establishing the conditions for the hostages' release—the militants had no choice but to wait while the mechanics of achieving a release with minimal political damage to the clerical leaders were worked out. Ultimately Khomeini provided the final push, directing the Iranian negotiators to settle the hostage issue before the new US administration came into office. [REDACTED]

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Conclusions

The militants' seizure of the US Embassy in Tehran and the prolonged hostage crisis that followed have been referred to in Iran as the "second revolution." The Embassy takeover was the final blow to the Bazargan government and the reformist domestic and foreign policies it pursued. The renewed public enthusiasm for "revolutionary" policies stirred up by the Embassy seizure ensured the approval of the draft constitution in the referendum in December 1979. Renewed revolutionary fervor also weakened the remaining political moderates and strengthened the hardline clerics by providing them with an issue to use against their opponents. The political turmoil that resulted distracted public attention from the failures of the revolutionary leadership to deliver on their promises and address basic social and economic problems. [REDACTED]

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Iran's "second revolution" was a product and continuation of the first. The prolonged crisis was made possible by several aspects of the continuing social upheaval in Iran:

- The presence of a revolutionary leader who sanctioned the destruction of the old order but failed to provide administrative authority to those he charged with building the new order.
- Consequently, the breakdown of governmental authority and a struggle for political dominance among competing factions of the leadership. Institutions capable of enforcing decisions through deployment of police and security forces were weak.
- The deep xenophobia whipped up by the militants and by the clerical leaders who thereby gained immediate political advantages and focused popular dissatisfaction with the revolution on an external enemy.
- Social cleavages accentuated by rapid social change in Iran over the past two decades that weakened the new institutions. The revolution brought together only temporarily several radically different groups—clerical and secular, reformist and revolutionary, old and young. [redacted]

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The prolonged hostage crisis was also made possible by two material factors. The militants found on the large Embassy compound the physical facilities necessary for a prolonged stay. The clerical leaders had state revenues and financial reserves resulting from oil production that allowed Iran the luxury of ignoring world opinion for a prolonged period. [redacted]

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